

"It started out with a kiss

How did it end up like this?

It was only a kiss."

The Killers - Mr. Brightside

Lego

Nerium

Nerium is the botanical genus for the oleander plant (*Nerium oleander*), a highly toxic, ornamental flowering shrub known for its beautiful pink, white, or red flowers and evergreen leaves, native to the Mediterranean and used globally in warm climates, but poisonous if ingested. The name comes from Latin and Greek, referring to this specific plant, which contains lethal cardiac glycosides.

I woke up in my apartment bathed in sunlight. The brightness was unexpected, almost aggressive—a flood of golden morning light pouring through the gap in my curtains, painting stripes across my ceiling and walls. I'd forgotten to close them completely last night, too tired from the day to pay attention to the small details that usually mattered. Now I was paying for that oversight.

The light hit my face with the particular intensity of late morning, the kind that said you've already wasted part of the day even when you hadn't. It made my eyes water. Made me throw my arm across my face, seeking darkness that wasn't there.

I lay there for a moment, suspended between sleep and waking.

My bedroom was quiet except for the distant sounds of the city outside—traffic, voices, the persistent hum of urban life that never fully stopped. The ceiling above me was painted a pale lavender, a color I'd chosen specifically because it was supposed to be calming. Right now, it just looked empty. A blank canvas waiting for something to fill it.

My alarm went off.

The sound cut through the quiet, familiar and unwelcome. I was already awake—had been awake for what felt like hours, though it was probably only minutes—but the alarm didn't know that. It just kept making its cheerful noise, insistent and oblivious to my emotional state. I reached for my nightstand without looking, my hand finding my phone with the muscle memory of countless identical mornings.

The alarm fell silent when I tapped the screen. For a moment, I just held the phone, staring at the wallpaper without really seeing it. Then my eyes focused, and the image came into clarity.

A white kitten among flowers.

The photo was one I'd taken at the shop a few weeks ago. A customer had come in with her pet—a small, fluffy thing with blue eyes and the particular self-assurance that all cats seemed to possess. While the woman browsed the arrangements, the kitten had escaped from her carrier and made its way to the display of potted orchids. I'd found it there, curled among the blooms like it belonged, like the flowers had grown around it specifically to provide a bed. The contrast was perfect—white fur against purple petals, soft warmth against delicate beauty.

I'd snapped the photo without thinking, capturing the moment before the owner noticed her escape artist and scooped the kitten back into custody. Now it was my wallpaper. A small reminder of sweetness in a world that didn't always provide it.

Looking at the kitten made me long for one of my own. I'd thought about it before—many times, actually. The apartment was quiet. Too quiet, some nights, when the weight of solitude pressed down and there was no one to share the silence with. A pet would help with that. A small, warm presence that would be waiting when I came home, that would curl up beside me on the couch, that would remind me I wasn't completely alone.

A kitten would be perfect. But every time I seriously considered it, practical concerns pulled me back.

All the time the poor thing would spend alone.

I looked around my apartment—at the stuffed animals that substituted for living companionship, at the careful arrangement of soft things that made the space feel occupied even when it wasn't.

I was gone so much. The flower shop in the mornings. University classes scattered throughout the week. The modeling jobs that came and went unpredictably. The errands and obligations and social expectations that pulled me out into the world even when I wanted to stay hidden. A kitten would be left alone for hours. Days, sometimes, if I had back-to-back commitments. It would wait by the door, wondering when I was coming back, not understanding why its person kept disappearing.

That wouldn't be fair.

Animals deserved better than that. Deserved owners who could actually be present, who could provide the companionship and care that living things required.

I wasn't that person. Not right now. Maybe not ever.

So the kitten remained a photograph on my phone—something to look at and long for, but never actually have.

Story of my life, I thought bitterly, and immediately felt guilty for the self-pity.

I checked the day.

The phone screen confirmed what I already knew but had been trying not to think about.

Wednesday.

The word seemed to pulse on the screen, heavy with significance it shouldn't have had. Any other Wednesday would have been fine. Just another day in the middle of the week, nothing special, nothing different. A day to get through on the way to the weekend. But after what happened with William...

After that night at his apartment, after the bruises and the shouting and the door slamming in my face...

After not going to his apartment last week, breaking the routine I'd maintained for years...

Wednesdays felt empty.

I'd brought flowers to William every Wednesday for as long as I could remember.

It had started when his mother was alive—a tradition she'd encouraged, part of her gentle campaign to keep her son connected to the world outside his apartment. After she died, I'd kept the tradition going. Every Wednesday, without fail. A new arrangement each week, carefully selected from the shop's inventory or specially assembled for him. Sunflowers when he needed brightness. Lilies when he needed calm. Wildflowers when I wanted him to remember that beautiful things could grow without being cultivated.

I'd show up at his door, flowers in hand, and he'd let me in. Sometimes we'd talk. Sometimes we'd watch a movie together, sitting on opposite ends of his couch, sharing the comfortable silence of long familiarity. Sometimes I'd stay for hours while he painted, keeping him company without demanding anything, just being present in a way that seemed to help, the smell of turpentine and oil paint becoming as familiar to me as my own perfume.

Those Wednesdays had been anchors. Fixed points in the chaos of my schedule, commitments I never broke. Now, that anchor was gone. And I was floating.

Until last week.

Last week, I hadn't gone.

My wrist had still been bruised. My shoulder still ached when I moved wrong. The memory of his face—twisted with something I didn't recognize, something that

wasn't the William I knew—was still too fresh, too painful to confront.

So I'd stayed away.

For the first time in years, I'd stayed away.

And the emptiness of that Wednesday had echoed through my entire week, a silence where there should have been connection.

Today was another Wednesday.

And I still didn't know if I could face him.

Part of me wanted to. The part that remembered all the good years, all the gentle moments, all the times he'd been the one to comfort me when my own life fell apart. That part wanted to believe that what happened was an aberration—a temporary breakdown, something he couldn't control, something that wouldn't happen again.

But another part of me—the part that still flinched when I moved my left arm too quickly—wasn't so sure.

What if it happens again? What if this is who he really is, underneath all the gentleness?

What if I go back and he hurts me worse?

The questions circled in my mind, relentless and unanswerable.

Today Hong was busy.

I checked my messages, already knowing what I'd find. A text from yesterday confirming what he'd mentioned in person: morning obligations, afternoon classes, no time to hang out.

"Sorry, shorty. University stuff is killing me. Rain check?"

I'd replied with emojis—cheerful ones, the kind that didn't reveal how much I'd been counting on his presence to fill the empty spaces in my day.

"No problem! Good luck with everything!"

The lie had tasted bitter even through text.

Because the truth was, I'd been relying on Hong more than I wanted to admit. His easy companionship, his quiet observations, the way he made me feel seen without demanding anything in return—all of it had become essential, a substitute for the connection I'd lost when William's door slammed shut.

Without Hong, I'd have to face the empty afternoon alone. Without Hong, I'd have to figure out what to do with myself on a Wednesday when I couldn't bring myself to visit the person I'd been visiting for years.

I had work in the morning.

The flower shop. My sanctuary. The place where I could lose myself in petals and stems and the particular satisfaction of creating something beautiful.

But the morning shift would end. And then the afternoon would stretch out before me, vast and unstructured, a blank space that used to be filled with William.

On other Wednesdays, I would have spent that time going to see him. Settling into the comfortable routine of being present for someone who needed my presence.

On other Wednesdays, we might have watched a movie. Something old, usually—William preferred classics, films from before he was born, stories that felt distant enough to be safe. We'd sit on his couch with takeout containers between us, the screen flickering in the dim room while he slowly relaxed into something approaching normalcy.

On other Wednesdays, I might have stayed silent for hours while he painted. Just existing in the same space, reading or scrolling through my phone or simply watching him work. He'd forget I was there sometimes, absorbed in his art, and I'd find comfort in that—in being trusted enough to witness his creative process, to see him vulnerable and focused and lost in something that wasn't pain.

Those Wednesdays had been precious. Those Wednesdays had been mine.

And now they were gone, and I didn't know how to fill the space they'd left behind.

I sighed and pushed myself upright. The sunlight was still pouring through the gap in the curtains, insistent and unavoidable. My phone showed the time—early still, but not so early that I could justify hiding in bed much longer.

The day was waiting.

Whether I wanted it or not.

Overthinking would be of no use, I told myself firmly. It won't change anything. It won't bring back the old Wednesdays. It won't make William better. It won't erase what happened.

All it would do was waste time I didn't have and energy I couldn't spare. I had to shower. Get dressed. Go to work. Survive the morning and figure out the afternoon when it arrived.

One step at a time.

That was how I'd gotten through everything else—my parents' abandonment, my sister's death, the slow accumulation of losses that had taught me how to carry weight without collapsing.

This was just one more thing.

One more Wednesday to endure. One more empty space to navigate.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed.

My feet touched the cool floor, the sensation grounding me in the physical present. —a sudden shock against the warmth of my skin that had been wrapped in blankets moments before. The apartment was quiet around me, full of soft things and gentle colors, a sanctuary I'd built specifically to combat the harshness of the world outside. The stuffed animals on my bed watched me with their button eyes—silent companions who never judged, never left, never changed.

They're not enough, I thought. They've never been enough.

But they were what I had.

I walked to the bathroom.

The tile was cold under my bare feet—that particular shock of coolness that made you gasp involuntarily, that pulled you fully into wakefulness whether you wanted to be there or not. I felt each step with exaggerated awareness, my body slowly leaving the soft cocoon of sleep and entering the harsher reality of the waking world.

The mirror showed me someone I wasn't sure I recognized. A young person with tired eyes and sleep-mussed hair, dark circles visible even in the morning light. My face looked thinner than I remembered—had I been eating enough? Had the stress of the past week carved itself into my features while I wasn't paying attention? I was wearing pajamas covered in cartoon characters. Care Bears, their cheerful faces grinning up at me, promising love and friendship and all the things that seemed increasingly out of reach.

The pajamas felt too childish for the weight I was carrying.

When did I become someone who needed armor made of softness? I wondered. When did the cartoon bears stop being enough?

I turned on the shower and waited for the water to warm.

The pipes groaned as they always did—a familiar complaint from the building's aging infrastructure. The water came out cold at first, then lukewarm, then finally

hot enough to produce steam. I watched it swirl in the small space, climbing toward the ceiling, slowly obscuring everything.

Steam began to fill the bathroom. It fogged the mirror in gradual waves, my reflection dissolving piece by piece. First my edges blurred, then my features softened, then I disappeared entirely—just a vague shape behind condensation, anonymous and undefined.

I found relief in that. In not having to look at myself. In not having to confront the vulnerability in my own face, the evidence of sleepless nights and unshed tears and questions I couldn't answer.

The mirror couldn't judge me if the mirror couldn't see me.

The water felt good when I stepped under it.

Hot and steady and relentless, it pounded against my shoulders and back with exactly the kind of pressure I needed. Each droplet was a small impact, a tiny reminder that I was still here, still physical, still occupying space in the world. The heat soaked into my muscles, loosening the tension I'd been carrying without realizing. My shoulders dropped. My neck relaxed. The stiffness of sleep—and of something deeper, something that had been building for a week—slowly began to dissolve.

I stood there for longer than necessary. The water streamed over my face, my closed eyes, my lips. I let it run into my mouth and out again, let it plaster my hair against my skull, let it wash away whatever it could reach.

The sound drowned out the thoughts. Or at least, it muffled them. Made them quieter, less insistent, less impossible to ignore.

What am I going to do with myself today? The question echoed in my mind, unanswered and unanswerable.

I had the morning at the flower shop—that much was certain. The comforting routine of inventory and arrangements, of customers who wanted beauty and paid for it, of work that kept my hands busy and my mind focused on something other than the mess of my personal life. But after that?

The afternoon stretched out before me like an empty page. No plans. No obligations. No one expecting me to be anywhere, to do anything, to exist in any particular way. That used to feel like freedom. Now it just felt like abandonment.

What am I going to do about William? That question was harder.

That question had been haunting me for a week, circling like a vulture over something dying, waiting for me to make a decision I wasn't ready to make. Every time I thought about it, my mind shied away—a horse refusing a jump, an instinct

that recognized danger and pulled back before disaster could strike.

Should I go see him? I imagined it: standing at his door, knocking or using the key I'd carried for years but never actually used. Facing whatever version of William waited on the other side. The gentle friend I remembered, or the stranger who'd grabbed my wrist and pushed me out into the hallway. Should I knock on that door again, risk another rejection, risk seeing that stranger's face wearing my best friend's features?

Should I stay away? That option felt like defeat. Like letting what happened erase years of friendship, years of shared sorrow, years of being the only person who consistently showed up. William needed someone. He'd always needed someone. If I abandoned him now, when he was clearly spiraling, what kind of friend was I?

Should I try to talk about what happened? The thought made my stomach twist. Having to put words to the experience. Having to describe the look in his eyes, the force of his grip, the way his voice had turned cold and unfamiliar. Having to admit, out loud, that the person I'd trusted most in the world had hurt me.

Or should I just pretend it never did? That was probably what William wanted. What he expected. The path of least resistance, the way we'd handled difficult things before—just moving past them, burying them, choosing the illusion of peace over the discomfort of truth.

I didn't know. The admission felt like a failure. I didn't know anything anymore.

All I knew was that the water was getting cold, that the heat was fading, that I couldn't stand in this shower forever no matter how much I wanted to. I had to get out. The day was waiting whether I was ready for it or not.

I reached for the handle and turned off the water. The sudden silence was almost worse than the cold. The bathroom felt too quiet, the absence of rushing water leaving room for all the thoughts I'd been trying to drown. I stepped out onto the bathmat—a soft, absorbent thing in a cheerful pink that seemed to mock my mood—and reached for my towel.

The air was cool against my wet skin. I dried myself methodically, mechanically, the routine so familiar I barely had to think about it.

And then I saw the bruises. They were on my left side, visible now that I was standing in front of the mirror without steam to obscure them.

The bruises were fading. That was the first thing I noticed. They'd been angry purple—vivid evidence of impact, of hands that gripped too hard, of a body that had collided with a doorframe it was never meant to touch. Now they were turning that sickly yellow-green that meant healing. The angry red at the edges had softened. The darker centers had lightened.



They didn't hurt anymore. Not really. Not unless I pressed on them deliberately, seeking out the tenderness that was slowly disappearing. They were becoming history rather than present—something that had happened rather than something that was happening.

Physical wounds healed.

That was the easy part.

The body knew how to repair itself. Broken skin closed. Bruised tissue recovered. Given enough time and rest, almost anything could heal—cells regenerating, blood flow restoring, the evidence of damage gradually erased until only memory remained.

It was the other stuff that lingered. The memories. The words. The look in William's eyes—that terrible blankness, that fury that seemed to come from somewhere I'd never seen before. The sound of the door slamming. The silence afterward. The way I'd sat in the hallway, crying, waiting for someone to come while knowing no one would.

Those things didn't have a healing timeline. Those things didn't fade to yellow-green and then disappear. They stayed vivid, fresh, as painful on day seven as they'd been on day one.

Maybe more painful, I thought. Because now I've had time to think about them.

I looked at my reflection. The steam had partially cleared, leaving streaks of visibility in the condensation. I could see pieces of myself—an eye, a shoulder, the curve of my cheek—fragmented and disconnected like a broken mirror.

I needed to start figuring out who I was without him.

The thought arrived suddenly, startling in its clarity. For years, I'd defined myself in relation to William. His friend. His support. The person who showed up every Wednesday, who remembered his mother's birthday, who kept him connected to a world he couldn't face on his own.

Without that role, who was I?

Just a kid who worked in a flower shop. A dance student who sometimes modeled. Someone whose parents had abandoned him, whose sister had died, whose closest friend had just—

I stopped the thought before it could finish.

That's not fair, I told myself. William is sick. He didn't mean it. He wasn't himself.

But the bruises didn't care about explanations. The bruises just were. And I needed

to figure out how to move forward, whether or not William was part of that future.

I dressed carefully. Not carefully as in I'm dressing to impress someone, but carefully as in I need to choose armor that will protect me from the day ahead. Every piece of clothing was a decision, a statement about who I wanted to be when I walked out that door.

A black tank top. Simple, fitted, the kind of basic piece that made everything else work. It covered the worst of the fading bruises while still being comfortable enough to move in. The black felt appropriate some how—not quite mourning, but not the bright colors I usually reached for either. A light brown open sweater. Oversized, soft, the sleeves long enough to pull over my hands when I needed the comfort of hiding. It felt like a hug—protective without being restrictive.

Faded black pants. Worn and comfortable, soft from a hundred washings. They had pockets big enough for my phone, my keys, all the small necessities of navigating the world.

Only light makeup. Concealer under my eyes to hide the worst of the exhaustion. A little lip balm. Nothing that required careful application or steady hands—just enough to look like I was trying, like I hadn't given up on presenting a face to the world.

I braided my hair. It was what I'd been doing all week—the easiest way to make still-damp hair look good, the most reliable protection against the wind that would otherwise turn my careful styling into chaos. My fingers moved through the familiar motions automatically, dividing and weaving and securing without conscious thought.

When I finished, the person in the mirror looked... acceptable. Not great. Not the polished version of myself I showed at modeling jobs or university events. But acceptable. Someone who could function. Someone who could get through the day. That would have to be enough.

Breakfast was simple.

Coffee with milk—lots of milk, the way I liked it—a small cup, not the elaborate drinks I sometimes made for myself when I had time and energy. Just caffeine and comfort, the warmth spreading through my chest like a small fire.

Fruit—cut quickly, arranged carelessly on a plate. Strawberries that were slightly past their prime. A banana that was getting too ripe. An apple I'd been meaning to eat for days. Something light.

I didn't have the appetite for anything heavier, and my stomach was too unsettled for anything that required actual digestion. The fruit was just fuel—enough to get me through the morning, enough to keep my body functioning while my mind dealt

with everything else. I ate standing at my kitchen counter, looking out the window at the city below.

Bangkok was already awake, already busy, already full of people rushing to destinations I couldn't imagine. They all had their own lives, their own problems, their own Wednesday mornings to survive.

None of them were thinking about me. There was comfort in that, somehow. In being anonymous. In being just one more figure in the endless crowd, unremarkable and unremembered.

Maybe that's all I ever was, I thought. Just one more person trying to get through the day.

I grabbed my bag.

The one with the character drawings—little cartoon figures that Hong had teased me about but secretly liked. He'd made fun of it the first time he saw it, called it "aggressively adorable," and then asked where I'd gotten it because his nephew would probably love something similar. That was Hong. Always finding ways to be kind while pretending to be detached.

I checked for my keys. My wallet. My phone. The wallpaper stared back at me. The white kitten. The flowers. That perfect moment of unexpected beauty, captured and preserved, a reminder that good things still existed even when they felt impossible to find.

Someday, I promised the image silently.

Someday I'll have a home where nothing has to be alone.

A place with room for a cat. With room for another person. With room for all the love I had to give, currently stored up inside me with nowhere to go.

Someday I'll have a life where Wednesday afternoons are filled with people who want to be with me. Not because they need me, but because they choose me.

But that was someday.

Today was Wednesday.

And I had to get through it first.

For now, I had the flower shop. The familiar rhythm of work, the comfort of routine, the particular satisfaction of creating beauty even when I didn't feel beautiful myself. I could lose myself in the arrangements, in the colors, in the careful attention required to make something worth buying.

I had the morning. Hours of useful occupation, of being needed, of having a role that made sense. The shop would be busy—they always were, midweek, as people placed orders for weekend events or stopped by for impulse purchases to brighten their offices.

I had the small, persistent hope that maybe, just maybe, the afternoon wouldn't be quite as empty as I feared. Maybe something would come up. A last-minute shift. An invitation from a friend. An opportunity I couldn't predict, appearing out of nowhere to fill the void.

Or maybe I'd find a way to fill it myself.

Maybe I'd go somewhere I'd never been. Do something I'd never done. Take the first step toward building a life that didn't depend on anyone else's presence to feel complete.

Maybe.

The word felt fragile. Uncertain. But it was there.

I paused at the door, looking back at the space I'd created.

The stuffed animals sat on my bed in their careful arrangement, button eyes watching me leave. The blankets were piled on the couch in artful disarray. The pastel colors caught the morning light, making everything look soft and safe and specifically designed to protect against a harsh world. It looked like a child's room.

The thought struck me with unexpected force. All these soft things, all this careful curation of comfort—it was the room of someone who was afraid. Someone who needed barriers against the darkness. Someone who hadn't quite grown up, or couldn't quite grow up, or didn't know how to face the world without layers of cushioning between themselves and reality. It looked like a hiding place.

Maybe that's all it ever was.

A sanctuary built from stuffed animals and pastel colors, designed to create the illusion of safety in a world that had never actually been safe. A child's fort made of blankets and dreams, pretending to be an adult's apartment.

Is that who I am? I wondered. Someone who hides?

The question had no easy answer. But I couldn't stay here forever, analyzing my interior design choices and what they might say about my psychology. I had a job. I had responsibilities. I had a Wednesday to survive.

I stepped out into the hallway, locking the door behind me.

Wednesday began.

The hallway was quiet, my footsteps echoing off the walls as I walked toward the stairs. My neighbors were either at work already or still sleeping—I rarely saw them, rarely knew their names, rarely felt like part of any community despite living in the same building. That was city life. Anonymous. Convenient. Lonely in ways that never quite stopped hurting.

I descended the stairs, my bag bumping against my hip with each step. The building's lobby was empty except for the mailboxes, the security door, the potted plant that someone was clearly overwatering based on the yellow leaves.

I pushed through the door into the morning.

The street was bright and busy when I emerged. Sunlight hit me immediately, warm and insistent, making me squint behind my glasses. The air smelled like exhaust and street food and the particular humidity of Bangkok in the warm season—heavy, present, impossible to ignore.

People moved past in their private dramas. A businessman in an expensive suit, talking urgently into his phone. A mother pushing a stroller, looking tired but determined. A group of students, probably headed to the same university I attended, laughing about something I couldn't hear. Everyone caught up in their own concerns. Their own schedules. Their own Wednesdays to navigate.

No one paid attention to the small figure in the oversized sweater who paused on the sidewalk, orienting herself toward the day ahead.

That was fine. That was what I expected. Invisibility was its own kind of protection.

I started walking toward the flower shop.

The route was familiar—so familiar I could do it with my eyes closed, my feet carrying me automatically while my mind drifted elsewhere. Past the café that made good coffee but charged too much. Past the tattoo studio that Hong and Tui worked at, its neon sign dark in the morning light.

I slowed as I passed Ink & Ashes.

The windows were dark, the "Closed" sign still displayed. Too early for them to be open, though I knew Tui usually arrived around this time to set up for the day.

Tui.

The name surfaced in my mind, bringing with it a complicated tangle of feelings I didn't have time to examine. He'd been so kind. He let me cry in his apartment. He'd been there in ways I hadn't known I needed, steady and reliable when everything else was chaos.

I hadn't seen him properly.

Just the brief wave yesterday, when I'd been picking up Hong. A moment of eye contact, a raised hand, nothing that required actual conversation or emotional processing. Maybe that was deliberate on his part. Maybe he was giving me space. Maybe he was just busy. Or maybe he'd seen how broken I was that night and decided I was too much trouble to get involved with.

Stop it, I told myself firmly. You're spiraling. Just keep walking.

I tore my gaze away from the studio and continued toward the flower shop.

The shop was only a few more blocks away.

I could see its sign from here—"Blooming Memories," the name William's mother had chosen, the words that now felt bittersweet every time I read them.

This was my safe place. My purpose. The thing that got me out of bed on mornings when nothing else seemed worth the effort.

I walked a little faster, eager to reach the familiar comfort of work.

The morning was waiting.

The flowers were waiting.

And somewhere in the back of my mind, the faintest hope was waiting too—the possibility that this Wednesday, somehow, might be different. That the afternoon wouldn't be as empty as I feared. That something might change, shift, transform in ways I couldn't predict.

Blooming, I thought, remembering the tea I'd given Tui months ago. Like the tea that unfolds in hot water. Like the flowers that open when conditions are right. Maybe I could bloom too. Maybe there was still time.

I arrived at the flower shop just as the morning light was hitting the windows at that perfect angle. The storefront looked beautiful at this hour—golden rays filtering through the glass, illuminating the displays I'd helped arrange last week. Roses and lilies and exotic blooms I'd learned to identify over years of working here, all glowing like they were lit from within.

The name was painted on the glass in elegant script, the same font William's mother had chosen when she first opened the shop decades ago. Before William was born. Before I was born. Before any of the complications that now tangled our lives together. I pushed through the door, the familiar chime announcing my arrival.

The part-time girl who worked as a cashier was already there.—efficient and cheerful—was already there, her face illuminated by the glow of the computer

screen as she reviewed the day's delivery schedule.

"Good morning, Lego!" she called out, not looking up from the logistics of routing drivers through Bangkok traffic.

"Good morning." I replied, heading straight for the back.

The staff room was small but functional. Lockers lined one wall, hooks for aprons on another. A small table with chairs for breaks that rarely got taken. A clock that ticked too loudly, counting down the hours until freedom. I clocked in, watching the digital display register my arrival: 8:47 AM.

I grabbed my apron from its hook—slightly faded now, the shop's logo barely visible under layers of wear. It still smelled faintly of flowers, of green stems and pollen, of the particular perfume of the work I did. I tied it around my waist with practiced efficiency.

Gloves came next—thin latex, to protect my hands from thorns and the particular irritants that some stems produced. I pulled them on, flexing my fingers to ensure a proper fit, feeling the familiar constraint of the material against my skin.

Ready. Or as ready as I was going to be. I walked back out to the main floor and started working.

Making bouquets was automatic now.

My hands knew what to do without requiring input from my brain. Select the flowers—assessing quality, checking for damage, choosing the blooms that would look best together. Trim the stems at the proper angle—sharp scissors, clean cuts, the exact length that would allow for optimal water absorption. Arrange them in the vase or paper—building from the center outward, creating balance and movement, following rules I'd learned from watching my aunt work when I was still a child.

Aunt. That's what I'd called William's mother. She wasn't my actual aunt—no blood relation at all—but she'd been more of a parent to me than my actual parents had been for years. She'd taught me to arrange flowers, to cook simple meals, to find joy in small things. She'd welcomed me into her home when my own home felt empty and cold. And when she died, she'd left me this—the shop, the skills, the particular kind of purpose that came from creating beauty for others.

I made bouquet after bouquet, moving automatically, my hands steady even when my thoughts weren't.

This was something I knew how to do well, standing at this same counter, working with these same tools, creating the same kinds of arrangements that had sustained the business for decades. Floral arrangements that I hoped would brighten someone's day. A get-well bouquet for someone in the hospital, carefully designed

to be cheerful without being overwhelming. Flowers that said I'm thinking of you without requiring words. An anniversary arrangement for a couple celebrating forty years together. Classic roses, elegant baby's breath, the kind of timeless beauty that matched a timeless love.

A sympathy display for a funeral—white lilies, soft greens, the particular sadness of flowers meant to honor the dead.

Fix someone's fight. I'd made those bouquets too. The "I'm sorry" arrangements, the "please forgive me" bundles, the desperate attempts to repair damage with beauty. They were some of our most popular orders—people who'd said terrible things, done terrible things, hoping that flowers could somehow undo what couldn't be undone.

Did they work? I wondered sometimes. Did the apologies get accepted? Did the relationships survive? I never knew. I just made the bouquets and handed them to the customers and hoped for the best.

Bouquets of flowers that fixed my day. That was the real reason I kept working here, even when the pay was barely enough. Every arrangement I created was a small act of hope—a belief that beauty could make a difference, that the right flowers at the right moment could shift something in someone's heart. Maybe I needed to believe that because I needed it to be true for myself.

After about two hours, I came out of my trance. I blinked, suddenly aware of my surroundings in a way I hadn't been while working. The shop had filled with people since I started—customers browsing the displays, staff members moving between stations, the particular buzz of activity that marked a successful morning.

More workers had arrived.

I'd greeted them automatically, I realized. A "good morning" that required no thought, an exchange of pleasantries that was more ritual than communication. They'd responded in kind, the social contract fulfilled, and I'd returned to my work without actually registering their presence. That was what we said. What everyone said. A phrase so common it had lost all meaning, reduced to just another sound in the symphony of daily life. No one ever failed to give it. No one ever failed to receive it. And no one ever asked if the morning was actually good, or if the person saying the words was actually okay.

That was probably for the best. If anyone asked, I wasn't sure what I'd say.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of activity.

I sprayed water in the greenhouse—carefully, methodically, making sure each plant received exactly what it needed. The air in there was always different—damp and earthy, smelling of growth and possibility, a small jungle hidden behind the main shop.



I delivered orders at the counter—handing wrapped bouquets to customers, accepting payment, offering care instructions that most people promptly forgot. "Keep them away from direct sunlight." "Change the water every two days." "Trim the stems at an angle."

I made new custom bouquets—special orders that required actual thought, actual attention. A client who wanted "something dramatic but not too romantic" for a corporate event. Another who needed "cheerful but sophisticated" for a gallery opening. The particular language of flowers, translated into arrangements that said what words couldn't.

I did everything I could to prevent my brain from spiraling out of control. Because if I stopped moving, I'd start thinking.

And if I started thinking, I'd think about William. About the apartment. About the door that had slammed in my face. About the bruises that were fading on my side, turning from evidence into memory. About whether I should go back. Whether I could go back. Whether our friendship could survive what had happened, or whether that night had broken something that couldn't be repaired.

Or I'd think about Tui.

About the way he'd carried me up the stairs, so gentle despite his strength, worried in ways he tried to hide. About the texts we'd exchanged since then—brief, surface-level, nothing like the intensity of that night. About the complicated feelings I had for him—feelings I couldn't name, couldn't examine, couldn't afford to pursue. About the way my heart had started racing when I saw him through the window of the studio yesterday, even though I was just there to pick up Hong.

Stop.

I pulled my thoughts back to the present, back to the work, back to the immediate reality of stems and petals and the particular challenge of making something beautiful.

That was safe. That was controllable. Everything else was too dangerous to touch.

I cleaned. Sweeping the floor of fallen petals, wiping down the counters, making sure the shop looked as pristine as it had when we opened. The routine of maintenance, the small tasks that added up to a well-run business.

I arranged. Adjusting displays that customers had disturbed, rotating stock so the freshest flowers were always visible, creating small moments of beauty in corners that might otherwise be overlooked.

I swabbed. The greenhouse needed constant attention—humidity controlled, temperatures monitored, each plant receiving the particular care its species

required. I moved through the space like a nurse in a hospital ward, checking on my patients, ensuring their survival.

I moved flowers from place to place. Shifting inventory based on what was selling, restocking the popular varieties, hiding the ones that weren't moving well. The constant dance of retail, trying to match supply with demand, trying to predict what people would want before they knew they wanted it.

I delivered more orders that had to be sent to homes. Wrapping them carefully for the delivery drivers, including the care cards, making sure each arrangement was perfect before it left the shop. These were the most important ones—the ones that represented us even when we weren't there to explain them.

Every order was a promise. This is the best we can do. This is what your money bought. This is the beauty we've created for you. I hoped we lived up to it.

And when I realized it, my alarm was ringing. The sound cut through my concentration, sharp and insistent, pulling me out of the flow state I'd been maintaining for hours.

3:00 PM.

My shift was already over.

I stared at my phone for a moment, processing the information. The morning had disappeared somehow—consumed by work, by routine, by the desperate need to stay busy and not think.

It had worked. But now the working was done, and the afternoon stretched out before me like an empty room I didn't know how to fill.

I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. The realization hit me suddenly, bringing with it a wave of lightheadedness that I should have noticed hours ago. The fruit and coffee I'd consumed that morning—how long ago? Six hours? Seven?—had long since been burned through.

My body was running on fumes. My hands were cold.

I looked down at them, still encased in the latex gloves that had become like a second skin. Even through the protection, I could feel the chill—the damp coolness that came from handling water and stems all day, from working in the greenhouse where the air was always moist.

You need to take care of yourself.

But the voice felt distant, like someone else's advice, like instructions I was free to ignore.

I helped with one last order before leaving.

A man at the counter, nervous in the particular way of people about to do something important. He was maybe thirty, well-dressed, his fingers drumming against the counter while he waited.

"Red roses," he said when I approached. "A dozen. The best you have."

A typical order. I nodded and moved to the rose display, selecting the finest specimens—deep crimson blooms, fully opened but not yet past their prime, stems long and strong and free of blemishes. I arranged them with care, wrapping them in our signature paper, tying the ribbon with the bow I'd perfected over years of practice.

The customer paid. His credit card went through without issue. The receipt printed. The transaction was complete.

But then he paused. "Can I get a card as well?"

"Of course."

I handed him one of the small cards we kept for messages—elegant cream paper, blank and waiting. A pen followed. He bent over the counter, writing quickly, his hand moving in confident strokes. Whatever he was saying, he already knew the words. He'd probably been rehearsing them, practicing in front of mirrors, preparing for this moment.

When he finished, he tucked the card into the bouquet, thanked me, and left.

The door chimed behind him, and then he was gone—just another customer, just another transaction, just another story I'd never know the ending of. Then I heard my coworkers whisper. They were at the register, watching the man disappear down the street through the window. Their heads were bent together, the universal posture of gossip.

"He's probably going to propose."

"Did you see his face? Definitely a proposal."

"Those roses were perfect. She's going to say yes for sure."

"How romantic."

The words washed over me like cold water.

Was it romantic? A man buying flowers for a woman he loved, preparing to ask for forever? The classic story, the expected narrative, the happily-ever-after that everyone assumed was the goal. Or was it just another transaction? Money exchanged for beauty, beauty exchanged for love, love exchanged for... what?

Security? Companionship? The illusion that someone would stay?

Stop being cynical, I told myself. It probably is romantic. He probably does love her. They'll probably be happy. But I couldn't shake the heaviness in my chest, the sudden weight of watching someone move toward the thing I wasn't sure I'd ever have.

I took a step back from the counter.

"I'm heading out," I announced to no one in particular. "Shift's over." My coworkers nodded, already returning to their work, their gossip, their own small dramas. I was just another person leaving at the expected time, unremarkable and unremarked upon.

I said goodbye—a general wave, a general farewell, nothing that required actual attention or response. Then I walked to the staff room.

The locker held my things exactly as I'd left them.

Bag. Phone. The small collection of personal items that traveled with me between home and work, the portable elements of my identity. I removed my apron, hanging it back on its hook. Peeled off the gloves, disposing of them in the bin. Ran my cold hands under warm water, trying to restore some feeling to fingers that had gone numb.

The person in the mirror above the sink looked tired. Not dramatically exhausted—not the kind of tired that drew concerned comments—but weary in a fundamental way. The weariness of someone who'd been carrying weight for too long, who'd been running on empty for so long they'd forgotten what full felt like.

You need to eat, the voice said again. You need to rest.

You need to figure out what you're going to do with the rest of this day.

I ignored all of it, gathered my things, and headed for the door.

I said goodbye one last time at the entrance of the shop. The other staff members nodded or smiled or offered small acknowledgments. The normal rituals of departure, the expected courtesies that kept social machinery running smoothly.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk.

The afternoon sun was warm on my face—warmer than the morning had been, the day having progressed while I worked without noticing. The street was busy with lunch-hour traffic winding down, with people returning to offices and obligations.

I started to turn toward home.

And then I stopped.

I turned around and walked back into the shop.

The chime announced my return.

"Forgot something?"

"No," I said. "I want to place an order." She blinked, clearly not expecting this.—we got employee discounts, but we also saw the flowers every day, all day. The novelty had worn off long ago.

"What kind of order?"

I looked at the displays around me. At the roses the proposal man had just bought. At the lilies waiting for their moment. At the exotic species I'd learned to identify and care for over years of practice.

What do you give someone you don't know how to talk to?

What flowers say "thank you for carrying me when I couldn't carry myself"?

What arrangement means "I think about you more than I should but I don't know what to do about it"? There wasn't a bouquet for that. But there was something close.

Who was it for? For Tui, obviously. For the man who'd been kind when he didn't have to be. For the person I couldn't stop thinking about, even when thinking about him made everything more complicated. But I couldn't say that.

But now my hands moved with new purpose, selecting flowers I knew intimately, species I'd cared for countless times.

White and pink Nerium first. The oleander blooms were delicate, almost fragile-looking, but I knew their reality was different. They were hardy plants, survivors that could withstand drought and neglect and still produce these impossibly soft flowers. The pink faded into white at the edges, a gradient that looked like watercolors blending on paper. Beautiful but resilient, I thought. Like the person I wanted to be.

Baby's breath came next. The tiny white flowers clustered together, filling the spaces between the oleander, creating texture and depth. They were so often overlooked—the supporting actors in bouquets that got all the attention—but without them, arrangements felt flat. Incomplete.

Maybe that's what I am too, I thought. The baby's breath. Always there, never noticed.

The second bouquet was different. Orange and half-yellow lilies of the valley—though not the traditional lily of the valley, which was white and tiny. These were something bolder. More vivid. The kind of flowers that demanded attention, that

couldn't be ignored even in a room full of other beautiful things. They shimmered in the afternoon light, their petals catching colors that seemed to shift as I moved them. Gold and amber and something almost like fire, contained in the delicate structure of each bloom. They were bold. They were happy. They were everything I wanted Tui to be.

These are for him, I realized. These are what I want to give him.

My hands were damp as I worked, the moisture from hours of handling flowers now mixed with something else—nervous sweat, probably, the physical manifestation of what I was about to attempt.

My coworkers noticed. They were helping me now, sensing that this was something different, something that mattered, found ribbon. Another worker brought tissue paper for wrapping. They moved around me with the particular efficiency of people who understood flowers, who knew without being told that these arrangements needed to be perfect.

"Special occasion?" someone asked.

"Just... a thank you," I said. "For someone who helped me." The half-truth tasted bitter on my tongue.

I looked at the cards. The small cream-colored rectangles sat in their holder on the counter, innocent and waiting. I'd handed them to countless customers, watched them write messages I'd never read, facilitated confessions and apologies and declarations that weren't mine to witness.

Now it was my turn. Should I write one to you? The question echoed in my mind, terrifying in its implications.

Did I really think I could confess my feelings to him? Through a card. Through flowers. Through the particular language I'd spent years learning, the way blooms could say what words couldn't.

Was I really going to do this?

I picked up a card. The paper was smooth between my fingers, familiar from a thousand previous handlings but somehow alien now. This wasn't a customer's message. This was mine.

I picked up a pencil and my eyes burned.

I've never confessed my feelings to anyone. The realization hit me with unexpected force. Nineteen years old, and I'd never once told someone that I liked them. Not in any way that mattered. Not with any expectation of response.

There had been crushes, of course. Teenage infatuations that bloomed and withered

within hours, intense in the moment but ultimately forgettable. Boys I'd admired from a distance, faces I'd memorized before they faded from memory. Nothing that lasted. Nothing that required action. Nothing like this. Nothing that lasted for hours and then I forgot about it.

This was different.

This had been building for months—since the first time I'd walked into the tattoo studio, since Hong had introduced us, since I'd started noticing things about Tui that I couldn't stop noticing. The way he moved. The way he laughed. The way his eyes crinkled when he smiled, really smiled, not the professional courtesy he showed to clients. The way he'd carried me up. The way his voice sounded when he was worried—softer than usual, gentler, like he was handling something fragile. This wasn't going to disappear in hours. This was already carved into me.

My hand trembled over the card. What was I supposed to write?

The question hung in the air, unanswered. Did I really think I could confess my feelings to him? Did I really believe that a handwritten note could bridge the gap between "Hong's young friend" and "someone worth loving"?

So I abandoned bravery for safety. I wrote a simple: For Tui.

Just his name. Just an acknowledgment that these flowers were meant for him specifically, not a random gesture, not an impersonal thank-you.

I tried to keep my handwriting from shaking too much. The letters came out slightly uneven anyway, betraying the tremor in my fingers, the racing of my heart. But they were legible. They would do. I placed the card among the orange flowers, tucking it between the shimmering petals where it would be found but not immediately visible.

Then I paid. The transaction was quick—employee discount applied, cash exchanged, receipt generated. Just another sale in the shop's daily records. Just another bouquet leaving the premises. I said goodbye—this time for real—and noticed something different in my companions' eyes.

Two bouquets suggested something. Intention. Purpose. Maybe they'd figured out what I was doing. Maybe they saw the nervousness in my movements, the way my eyes kept darting toward the door, the barely contained anxiety of someone about to do something terrifying. Or maybe they just thought it was sweet. The young flower shop worker, buying arrangements for someone special, blushing as he left. I didn't stay long enough to find out.

I walked slowly toward the tattoo studio.

Each step felt heavier than the last, the bouquets in my arms growing more

significant with every passing moment. The white and pink Nerium I held separately—those weren't for Tui. I wasn't sure who they were for yet. Maybe me. Maybe no one. Maybe I just needed something to hold onto.

But the orange lilies—those were definitely for him. And the card with his name was tucked inside. And I was actually going to do this.

Trying to calm my heart and breathing. Neither one was cooperating.

My heart pounded against my ribs like it was trying to escape. My breath came in shallow gasps that I tried to disguise as normal breathing. My palms were sweating, making the paper around the bouquets slightly damp.

This is insane, I thought. You're actually going to walk in there and give him flowers. You're going to stand there while he reads the card with his name on it. You're going to have to say something, explain yourself, somehow make this seem like a normal thing that normal friends do.

It wasn't normal. It was a confession, disguised as gratitude. And I was terrified. But when I arrived at the studio, only Yuki was visible.

I could see her through the window—the guest artist from Japan, the one I'd only met once but who had smiled at me like I was already a friend. She was in the next room, setting up her station or finishing some task I couldn't identify.

There was no sign of Tui.

No sign of Hong. My heart sank and lifted simultaneously—relieved that I had a moment to compose myself, disappointed that the moment of truth was being delayed.

I went inside. The bell above the door rang with its usual cheerful announcement, the sound that I'd heard so many times it had become part of the studio's identity. The space smelled like antiseptic and ink and something vaguely floral—probably me, I realized. The flowers I was carrying.

Yuki greeted me from the other room. "Lego!" Her voice was warm, welcoming. "Nice to see you again."

We had only met once—that brief introduction when I'd stopped by to see Hong—but she remembered my name. That meant something.

"Hi, Yuki." I tried to make my voice sound normal, casual, not like I was on the verge of doing something that might change everything. "I was looking for Tui. And Hong."

She smiled, the expression making her seem less like the serious artist I'd observed and more like a warm older sister. "Hong and Tui are upstairs," she said. "Eating, I think. They went up a little while ago."



"Thanks," I replied, already turning toward the stairs. Upstairs. Eating. Just the two of them.

I could do this. I could walk up there, interrupt their meal, hand over the flowers like it was nothing. Like I did this all the time. Like my heart wasn't about to beat out of my chest.

I left Yuki and headed for the back stairs.

The staircase to Tui's apartment was narrow, familiar now from the night he'd carried me up it. I remembered the creaking steps—third, seventh, the warped landing—and found strange comfort in their predictability.

The wind picked up as I climbed.

It came from somewhere—and felt cold compared to the weak afternoon sun that had been warming my face outside. I shivered slightly, adjusting my grip on the bouquets.

I stopped on the last step. The door to Tui's apartment was just ahead. I could hear voices coming from inside—muffled through the wood, but distinguishable.

Tui's voice. Hong's voice.

They were talking, animated about something. I heard a laugh—Hong's, probably—followed by words I couldn't quite make out.

I should knock. I should announce my presence, walk in like a normal person, pretend I wasn't standing here with a racing heart and sweaty palms and flowers that might as well have been a signed confession.

I reached for the door. And then I heard it.

"Stop insisting, Hong." Tui's voice was louder than usual—loud enough to carry through the door, loud enough for me to hear every word.

I froze on the step in front of the door. My hand dropped from the handle. My body went rigid, caught between the impulse to flee and the inability to move at all. Feeling like I was overhearing something I shouldn't. But I couldn't make myself leave.

"He's a good guy," Hong was saying, his voice carrying that particular tone of amusement that meant he was enjoying himself. "Nothing bad could happen between you two."

Who were they talking about?

"He's a kid, Hong." The words hit like physical blows.

A kid.

"A flower-obsessed kid." Tui's voice was firm, dismissive. "And way too young for me."

Who were they talking about? My heart answered before my mind could catch up.

They're talking about me. Of course they were. Who else would Hong be pushing Tui toward? Who else had been circling around the edges of this conversation for months, bringing gifts and making excuses to visit, hoping for something without knowing how to ask for it?

I was being rejected before I'd even said a word. The realization crashed over me like a wave, cold and brutal and impossible to escape. I hadn't confessed anything. Hadn't offered the flowers. Hadn't spoken a single word about how I felt.

And already, I had my answer.

No.

Not interested.

Too young.

Just a kid.

"You keep saying that," Hong pressed, "but he's not that young." Thank you, Hong. The thought was bitter, grateful, desperate. At least someone's trying.

But it didn't matter. Because Tui sighed—a heavy sound, audible even through the door—and said the words that shattered whatever hope I'd been carrying.

"He's not my type. Don't insist."

Not my type.

"We have a nice friendship." His voice was softer now, but the words were just as devastating. "He's young, that's why he brings me flowers. It's nothing more than that."

Nothing more than that.

My eyes stung. The tears came fast—faster than I could control, faster than I could hide. They spilled down my cheeks, hot and humiliating, evidence of exactly how much this mattered.

How much he mattered. And before I could hear anything else—before they could say more words that would carve themselves into my memory—I took a step back.

Then another.

Then I was going downstairs, moving quietly, desperately, trying not to make the steps creak, trying not to announce my presence, trying to disappear before anyone realized I'd been there at all.

I stood outside the shop for a moment. Hiding in its shadow, where the afternoon sun couldn't reach me, where no one passing by would notice the tears still streaming down my face. The orange bouquet was heavy in my arms. The card with Tui's name was still tucked inside. And I couldn't—I couldn't—walk back upstairs and hand him these flowers like nothing had happened. Couldn't stand there while he read his own name, while he tried to figure out what this meant, while I had to pretend I hadn't just heard him dismiss everything I felt as the naive enthusiasm of a child.

But I couldn't just throw the flowers away either. They were too beautiful. Too carefully made. Too much of my heart was wrapped up in those shimmering orange petals.

I walked back inside the studio.

"Sorry to bother you again, Yuki." My voice came out steadier than I expected—remarkable, given the lump in my throat, the tears still threatening to spill.

Yuki looked up from her station, surprise flickering across her features.

"Could you deliver these for me?" I held out the orange bouquet, the one with Tui's card, the one that had been meant for my hands to give. "I have to go somewhere else." The lie was thin, barely constructed, but I couldn't manage anything better.

Yuki smiled at me.

She didn't ask questions. Didn't push for explanations. Just accepted the bouquet with gentle hands, holding it like she understood—somehow—that these flowers were more than they appeared. "Yes, of course, don't worry." Her voice was kind. "They're beautiful, Lego."

They're beautiful. The words made the tears threaten again.

"Thank you," I managed.

And I left before my eyes could betray me completely.

I walked out of the studio. The bell chimed behind me—cheerful, oblivious, exactly the same as it had been when I'd entered. The world hadn't changed. The afternoon sun still filtered through the clouds. People still moved past on the sidewalk, caught up in their own concerns.

Everything was exactly the same.

Except me.

I was still clutching the other bouquet—the white and pink Nerium, the baby's breath, the arrangement I hadn't known what to do with. I held it like it was the only solid thing in a world that had suddenly gone liquid, like releasing it would mean losing my grip on reality entirely.

I was a fool. The thought arrived with terrible clarity.

All this time. All these months. I'd convinced myself that something was building between us—that the tea I gave him meant something, that his kindness that night meant something, that the way he looked at me meant something.

I was just being nice to the young friend of his mutual friend.

That's all I ever was.

A kid. A flower-obsessed kid. Someone to humor, to be gentle with, to treat kindly without any deeper feeling.

And I had fallen in love like an idiot.

Yes.

It was true. I could admit it now, here on this sidewalk, with tears falling and petals clutched and the wreckage of my hope scattered around my feet.

I liked him. No—that was too weak. I was always thinking about how to spend time with him, even though he was usually with Hong too. I was always noticing things about him—the way he moved, the way he laughed, the particular shade of brown in his eyes when the light hit them right.

I was always hoping and hope was the cruelest thing of all.

I felt the tears fall. They came freely now, streaming down my cheeks, probably ruining whatever light makeup I'd applied that morning. I didn't care. Couldn't care. There was too much inside me that needed to come out.

At least I hadn't written a stupid letter. At least the card only said his name—nothing romantic, nothing revealing, nothing that would have made my humiliation complete. At least he'd never know how much this hurt.

Who would like someone like me? The question surfaced, ugly and familiar, the voice of every insecurity I'd ever tried to suppress.

Someone who wasn't mature enough to leave the house without something with a cartoon on it?

I looked down at my bag—the one with the character drawings that Hong had teased me about. The one I'd thought was cute, was personal, was an expression of who I really was. Now it just looked childish.

The stuffed animals. The pastel colors. The Care Bear pajamas. All of it—every soft thing I'd surrounded myself with, every careful curation of comfort—was evidence of exactly what Tui had said.

A kid. I wasn't mature. Wasn't sophisticated. Wasn't the kind of person that someone like Tui would ever look at twice. I was just a nineteen-year-old with a crush, carrying flowers I'd been foolish enough to think might matter.

I kept walking. I didn't know where I was going—just away. Away from the studio. Away from the stairs where I'd heard the truth. Away from anything that reminded me of him.

The Nerium bouquet was getting crushed against my chest, but I couldn't bring myself to loosen my grip. These flowers were for no one now. Maybe they never were.

The afternoon stretched out before me—empty, just like I'd feared. But the emptiness felt different now. It wasn't just the absence of plans. It was the absence of hope.

Wednesday, I thought bitterly.

Just another empty Wednesday. Just another day of realizing that wanting something didn't mean you'd ever get it.

I kept walking, and the tears kept falling, and somewhere behind me, Yuki was probably delivering flowers to a man who would never understand what they were supposed to mean.